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# PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

## EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 66) – January 2014

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Dear Friends,

I trust you have had a break at Christmas and wish you well in the new-year. For me, Christmas was enjoyable but not entirely restful. It has been great to catch up with the news of various friends and to spend more time than usual with my family and at my home church.

Resuming work, it is encouraging to see that some churches in EFCC begin the New Year by devoting time to special prayer. If you look at the extract from Joe Thorn's blog below we cannot overestimate the value and importance of prayer in any part of our work. Should we be exegetically accurate and homiletically skilful in our preaching preparation? Of course we should and my article below on 'INVALUABLE HELPS FOR PREACHERS' highlights this concern. However we miss something fundamental if the church's work at every level is not bathed in prayer. We are no less dependent on the Holy Spirit for direction and power in Christian living than we are on Christ's righteousness for our justification – that is utterly and completely dependent! So our outreach programme and our children's works and our old people's lunch all need a background of committed believing prayer. Below is a sermon preached at Beverley on Sunday morning – with a slightly revised outline - with a view to encouraging their forthcoming week of prayer.

I wish you all a year of surprising blessing.

Yours in Christ,

*Mike Plant*

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### MIKE'S ITINERARY

9<sup>th</sup> February: Honiton am + pm  
23<sup>rd</sup> February: am Crystal Peaks + pm Wycliffe  
(both Sheffield)  
March 11<sup>th</sup> (Tuesday evening) Pontefract  
March 16<sup>th</sup> am Birstall  
March 23<sup>rd</sup> am + pm Alderholt  
March 27<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> Macedonia – preaching and leading seminars on spiritual gifts and relationships within the church

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### PSALM 126 'PRAYER FOR SUDDEN, REMARKABLE BLESSING'

**INTRODUCTION** I commended the church for having a special week of prayer to begin the New Year. What to pray for was very clearly set out in the Church Newsletter. My aim was to encourage them in HOW TO PRAY. To pray for sudden, remarkable and dramatic blessings as is done in Psalm 126.

**FIRSTLY: A PRAYER FOR SUDDEN AND DRAMATIC BLESSING (verse 4)** In my view the prayer here is what the entire Psalm revolves around. Praying for the restoration of our fortunes like 'streams in the Negev' requires explanation. The Negev = the Desert

and from my visit to Dubai in 2013 when we were treated to a ride in a 4WD across the Desert there is not a stream in sight! Not even a puddle! There is gritty sand and scrub and that's it. When there are streams in the Desert it relates to sudden, torrential rains (perhaps in the hills) and flash floods. One writer, who had been involved in archaeological digs in the Middle-East, spoke of the awesome power unleashed, with roads and bridges being swept away. It also brings life – some of the most glorious pictures I have ever seen show the Australian outback in bloom when it has rained after 20+ years of drought. We need the courage and faith to pray for blessing – for example conversions in our family – when there is no sign of it coming (indeed where there is every sign it isn't coming!)

### **SECONDLY: THE CONFIDENCE TO PRAY FOR SUDDEN AND DRAMATIC BLESSING (verses 1 – 3)**

This is drawn from **1) Their experience of the Lord's Salvation (verses 1 + 2)** There is a word link between verse 1 and verse 4 in that the word translated 'restore' in verse 4 is translated 'brought back' in the NIV. It was extraordinary and dramatic – they were exiles in Babylon and were 400 miles from home across the desert and nearer 800 miles following the Fertile Crescent, which was the normal route. A

change of superpower from Babylon to Persia leads to the decree of Ezra 1: 1. Our experience parallels their experience (after all OT salvations model NT salvation). All conversions are in fact dramatic – some obviously appear so but all are dramatic for as Jonathan Edwards observed: ‘All states of nature are equidistant from grace’. If we pass from death to life and from non-creation to new creation it is an absolute change not a gradual one - no corpse is more nearly alive than the next corpse. **2) Their current experience of Salvation (verse 3)** In the hard tough experience of weeping (see verses 4 – 6) they need constantly to call to mind the dramatic salvation that brought them there. We need to illuminate our situation by seeing it as the outcome and in the context of our wonderful salvation.

**THIRDLY: THE CONSEQUENCE OF ANSWERED PRAYER FOR SUDDEN BLESSING (verses 5 + 6)** The Psalmist looks for a change in the experiences they are going through. **1) Now** They experience weeping and sadness – they came back to a land which had been left to itself and where the whole process of farming was sheer, grinding hard work. As evangelism and church building is in our own day! **2) Then** ‘Songs of Joy’ brought about by the wonderful realization that God is with us – when a church experiences dramatic answers to prayer it produces joy and builds faith for further ambitious praying.

**CONCLUSION** What should limit our praying? Ephesians 3: 20 + 21 speaks of our God who ‘is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine’. Ephesians 3: 1 – 13 tells us what the gospel can do for us, Ephesians 3: 14 – 19 tells us what the gospel can do within us and both are beyond imagining.

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## AN EXTRACT FROM JOE THORN’S BLOG

Preachers, I hope you labour in the preparation of your sermons. But I fear we put too much trust in the mechanics of ‘sermon prep,’ believing excellent commentaries, classic writings, a good homiletic outline, and a strong conviction are all that’s needed to prepare to preach the word. But this is not enough.... because it misses out what may be the most critical component of sermon study. In ‘The Christian Ministry’, Charles Bridges (says):

Wycliffe’s judgment of the main qualification of an expositor of Scripture is... striking and accurate. He should be a man of prayer-he needs the internal instruction of the primary Teacher. Dr Owen observes with his usual impressiveness-‘For a man solemnly to undertake the interpretation of any portion of Scripture without invocation of God, to be

taught and instructed by his Spirit, is a high provocation of him; nor shall I expect the discovery of truth from any one, who thus proudly engages in a work so much above his ability. But this is the sheet anchor of a faithful expositor in all difficulties; nor can he without this be satisfied, that he hath attained the mind of the Spirit in any Divine revelation. When all other helps fail, as they frequently do, this will afford him the best relief. The labours of former expositors are of excellent use: they are far from having discovered the depth of this vein of wisdom; nor will the best of our endeavours prescribe limits to our successors; and the reason why the generality go in same track, except in some excursions of curiosity, is- not giving themselves up to the conduct of the Holy Spirit in the diligent performance of their duty.

After preaching for nearly twenty years, I can assure you I have learned this the hard way. It is easy to rely on a great tool, like Logos Bible Software, without relying on God for our clarity, conviction, and confidence in preaching. We need tools to help us, but we need the Holy Spirit to illumine, convict and empower. And much of the Spirit’s work in us will be done in conjunction with prayer. I guess I shouldn’t say I *have* learned this. I am still learning it.

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## WE’RE A FRIENDLY CHURCH!

**An Unrealized Problem!** No church I know claims to be unfriendly, so this is something most of us don’t see as a problem. The experience of going to church as a visitor can be revealing. One of my most painful experiences was to be on my own in a well-known evangelical church when we were urged to greet one another. It was my first visit and I waited to be approached but everyone was too busy greeting their friends. A friend talks of visiting a church to preach – everyone was friendly to him but his wife came in separately and sat in the congregation and was totally ignored. That improved only slightly when he introduced her to those greeting him.

**What is really going on?** Jack Miller, in ‘Outgrowing the Ingrown Church’, has a section on ‘A Friendly Church’ (pages 82-4). His introduction is: ‘I believe that many congregations are so dulled to the biblical norm of a welcoming church that the officers and members assume they are much more welcoming than they actually are.’ He illustrates from a visit to a church in Texas where he found the church insistent that they were a church that welcomed visitors.

What was the reality? The church was declining and few visitors returned. The members were not really doing very much and seemed uncommitted. Jack contacted a woman who had recently attended a Sunday service and had not returned. Her comment was: 'I had no problem making it to the door without a single person greeting me – except the pastor.' She summed up the problem: 'I noticed that they gathered in little groups to greet their friends. They are friendly to each other and think that means they are also friendly to visitors.' A deacon observed: 'Actually, we are expecting the pastor to do all the real work of welcoming. He's a hard worker and he carries the rest of us on his shoulders.'

**A way forward** There are a number of levels this needs to be developed on:-

1. **Purely Practical** Do we have spiritually qualified and naturally gifted people greeting people at the door? They need to do more than say 'hello' to newcomers. They need to show an interest in them and find someone in the congregation to connect them to – and take them to sit with them. They need to make sure they know what is going to happen in the forthcoming week. We need to inform and equip for this.

**Right Beliefs** 1) God and his welcome for the unbeliever The Pharisees grumbled about Jesus that (Luke 15: 2), 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' In doing this the following parables (the lost sheep, coin and son) make it clear that Jesus in doing this simply reflecting his father's character. An orthodox belief about God makes this truth central in our approach to visitors to our churches. 2) We all share the responsibility to fulfil the Great Commission It is not the pastor's responsibility, or the missionary's responsibility but everyone's. So everyone is to be welcoming and have an investment in seeing the visitor to the church stay and be saved.

Nothing boosts me like hearing someone visited a church in EFCC and found it both doctrinally strong and loving and warm. These are not alternatives but ought to inevitably accompany each other.

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## **AN UNUSUAL CHRISTMAS HYMN (Gadby's 709)**

*'Who hath despised the day of small things'* (Zechariah 4: 10)

The Lord that made both heaven and earth,  
And was himself made man.  
Lay in the womb, before his birth,  
Contracted to a span.

Behold! From what beginnings small  
Our great salvation rose;  
The strength of God is owned by all;  
But who his weakness knows?

Let not the strong the weak despise;  
Their faith, though small, is true;  
Though low they seem in other's eyes,  
Their Saviour seemed so too.

Nor meanly of the tempted think;  
For O what tongue can tell;  
How low the Lord of life must sink,  
Before he vanquished hell?

As in the day of flesh he grew,  
In wisdom, stature, grace.  
So in the soul that's born anew,  
He keeps a gradual pace.

No less almighty at his birth,  
Than on his throne supreme;  
His shoulders held up heaven and earth,  
When Mary held up him.

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## **TWO INVALUABLE HELPS FOR PREACHERS**

Particularly in the early years of preaching we will want to acquire the books that will be most helpful to us in our ministry. Imagine you want to preach through Luke's Gospel – what commentaries will help you most? This is an important question not just because you want what is most helpful but, on what is often a VERY limited budget, you want to the best value for money in a world where major commentaries can be £50+ and the two of the best on Luke are £40 and £20 respectively. You can ask a friend – if I discover someone is preaching through a bible book I will often ask what they have found helpful in preparation and that's why we've often had articles in P & W by those who have preached through specific Bible books sharing their experience with us. However, we also need a comprehensive guide which tells you which commentaries are good and what they are good for!

This is where I find two books, Don Carson's 'New Testament Commentary Survey' (NTCS) now in its seventh edition and Tremper Longman 111's 'Old Testament Commentary Survey' (OTCS) now in its fifth edition, both published by Baker Academic Press to be invaluable. The books are similar but not identical in format. They list series of commentaries and introductory books on Old and New Testament and rate them. The bulk of each book goes through the Bible books listing and evaluating commentaries on each book. The format is different in that OTCS lists the books alphabetically with comments attached and has a star system – the best is a five

star commentary – and a code system (L = Layman, M = Minister and S = Scholar/Student) telling you who the commentaries are suitable for. NTCS has a far more informal style which makes it harder to check up on barely remembered commentators, although it is still highly informative, and tends to begin with the most recent major commentaries before working through the different categories of commentary (established major commentaries, devotional commentaries and older reprints). I find both books invaluable in telling me what is being published and sometimes taking me outside of the commentary series and commentators that I am immediately familiar with.

Are there drawbacks with these books? I think there are:-

1. Inevitable Individualism I like reading JRR Tolkien far more than I enjoy reading CS Lewis. Others will differ from me about this and I suspect the issue isn't the value and worthiness of either author but simply how my mind works. The same applies to commentaries and how we appreciate them. David Firth's Apollos Commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel receives a five star rating in OTCS but a preacher I know found it useful but not the most useful of the commentaries he used in preaching these books. Sometimes you will find a commentary someone else recommends and finds really useful to be pretty mundane and they will feel the same about your favourites!
2. Chronological Snobbery This I think is something that is probably inevitable as these books are written by seminary professors rather than working pastors. Of course it is true that the most recent commentators stand on the shoulders of previous generations but it seems improbable that the best commentary on nearly every bible book has been written in the last twenty years. What older commentaries cannot do is respond to current discussions which are inevitably important for seminary professors but less important for most working pastors. We simply want to understand scripture and some 19<sup>th</sup> Century writers in particular, such as Patrick Fairbairn, Robert Johnstone and John Brown, are superb in understanding scripture and its flow and meaning but also being knowledgeable about its theology and application. We need to appreciate writers for what they do say and also for what they cannot say – no-one comments

knowledgeably about questions only discussed after their lifetime!

3. An Evident In-Crowd What I find more puzzling is that some writers are seemingly regarded as irrelevant and not worth reviewing. Many people have found Dale Ralph Davies' commentaries very useful and he has been published by both Christian Focus and Evangelical Press. Puzzlingly none of his commentaries are reviewed in OTCS. Even more puzzling to me is that Barry Webb, who has written the New International Commentary on the Old Testament on Judges, and the Bible Speaks Today commentaries on Isaiah and Zechariah is also not reviewed. Others seem inevitably to be judged to have written the most helpful commentaries and it seems to me that there is a sort of cronyism involved. The writers involved and approved of have the same theological agenda as the reviewer and are therefore (understandably) viewed favourably.

I suggest that in choosing the commentaries to use working through a bible book we need to have some criteria in mind. One commentary at least must be thoroughly exegetical, preferably up-to-date in its discussion of the original languages, and concerned to get us to the heart of the meaning of the passage. One must be theologically strong relating the passage to the whole message of scripture. One must be fresh and stimulating – something that sparks you off in terms of how you will preach a passage. If the commentaries are reasonably substantial and your preaching portions are bigger than verses and portions of verses you will not manage to use more than three or four commentaries at most.

Of course commentaries only have a place in our preparation and it is helpful not to use them too soon in the process. We start with the passage/text and use what language skills we have, and a variety of translations, to get to grips with what the passage means. Technical commentaries may help at this point if there are differing views on translation. Then we try and follow the line of thought and how it applies to us and to our hearers. It is only then that we start consulting more widely. This means the sermon remains our own. I remember Derek Swann telling me he never dared to read John Blanchard's 'Truth for Life' (on James) early in his preparation because he found they thought very alike and he would struggle to break away from John Blanchard's outlining of the passage.

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